

Promising Practices Case Study: Connecting Region/Ottawa (South Ottawa Community Legal Service, Ottawa)

The Initiative

The Connecting Region/Ottawa was initiated in 2010/11 to improve the local delivery of legal information, referrals and services to Ottawa residents who speak neither English nor French or who have difficulty accessing services because of a disability that impacts communication. Four Ottawa-based organizations (South Ottawa Community Legal Services, Social Planning Council of Ottawa, Overbrook-Forbes CRC and Pinecrest-Queensway CHC), working closely with a community-based advisory committee, recently completed the planning phase of the initiative. One of the priority issues identified through consultations is that populations often face barriers to access to timely, affordable and appropriate interpretation/translation services.

To address this and other priority issues, the Connecting Region Network has been established and has developed a three year action plan. The planning phase was funded as an initiative of the Law Foundation of Ontario (LFO), a grant-making organization that promotes and enhances justice for Ontarians in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, fully accessible and inclusive legal services environment. Implementation of the proposed action plan will be funded by both LFO and Legal Aid Ontario (Service Coordination Fund).

Concrete Steps Taken

In order to achieve its outcomes, a project coordinator worked with a Project Advisory Committee, comprised of 12 members representative of community legal services, social planning agencies, community information services, multiservice community resource centres, cultural interpretation services, agencies serving immigrants, and agencies serving persons with disabilities.

Various community engagement strategies to identify local system assets and challenges were undertaken. These included an on-line survey, interviews and focus groups, and solution focussed workshops to develop a common vision and to recommend priorities for process improvements. Subsequently, the initiative documented gaps in services and drafted a plan to bridge the gaps. A constellation model of governance to guide stewardship, decision-making and the planning processes was drafted ([Ottawa Connecting Region Governance Model.pdf](#)). 50 prospective organizational partners were identified to support network development and an integrated service response to priority issues. A full day conference was held to engage with these prospective partners and to obtain their endorsement of the draft vision, principles, goals, priorities, action and governance model; 34 organizations subsequently signed a Partnership Agreement to participate in proposed solutions as members of the *Connecting Region/Ottawa* network.

Challenges

While forming the *Connecting Region/Ottawa* network a significant challenge was the differential capacity of organizations to participate in a network that will look at sharing a common policy framework and practice protocols. This may be particularly challenging for small organizations that lack resources to undertake the required change management activities or less sophisticated organizations that may lack

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experience with policy development. Another challenge involved securing the ongoing buy in from organizations to partner in an initiative that may not necessarily be creating a new service or organization, but instead is asking organizations to bring their own resources to the table, reconsider how they deliver services and be open to making change through service realignment.

Results/Strengths/Sustainability

As of 31 March 2011, 34 organizations have signed an agreement to partner as a member of *Connecting Region/Ottawa*, with a commitment to achieving the following goals:

- Provide information that will help the focus populations understand their legal rights and provide information about the legal services available to help the focus populations to exercise those rights.
- Ensure that “every door is the right door” to legal services by training and supporting intake, information/assessment/referral (IAR) professionals and other front-line service providers to identify when a client from the focus populations requires a legal service and then to connect the client to the appropriate legal service.
- Ensure the availability of affordable legal services and access to affordable interpretation, translation, augmentative communication devices/services.
- Support legal services organizations to provide services to the focus populations within a framework that acknowledges issue complexity; that is, that the legal issue may be compounded by social and economic issues (threats to personal safety & security, homelessness, precarious employment, low income, indebtedness, family breakdown, etc).
- Ensure that the focus populations have timely and appropriate access to interpretation and translation services and/or augmentative communication devices and services by systematically removing barriers to access.

Critical to the Network's success is support from the Law Foundation of Ontario and other funders to enable implementation of the three year action plan and develop tools and resources that will promote long term sustainability. For example, the Network is currently developing an interactive web resource for regional legal information and referral and is also exploring bulk-purchasing and sharing of interpretation.

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